AMULETS AND FEATHERS

A STORY BY

LEILA ABOULELA

Amulets and Feathers

by Leila Aboulela

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A short story from the collection

I Am Heathcliff: Stories inspired by Wuthering Heights

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FOREWORD BY KATE MOSSE

SO, WHAT MAKES *Wuthering Heights* – published the year before Emily Brontë's own death – the powerful, enduring, exceptional novel it is? Is it a matter of character and sense of place? Depth of emotion or the beauty of her language? Epic and Gothic? Yes, but also because it is ambitious and uncompromising. Like many others, I have gone back to it in each decade of my life and found it subtly different each time. In my teens, I was swept away by the promise of a love story, though the anger and the violence and the pain were troubling to me. In my twenties, it was the history and the snapshot of social expectations that interested me. In my thirties, when I was starting to write fiction myself, I was gripped by the architecture of the novel – two narrators, two distinct periods of history and storytelling, the complicated switching of voice. In my forties, it was the colour and the texture, the Gothic spirit of place, the characterisation of Nature itself as sentient, violent, to be feared. Now, in my fifties, as well as all this, it is also the understanding of how utterly EB changed the rules of what was acceptable for a woman to write, and how we are all in her debt. This is monumental work, not domestic. This is about the nature of life, love, and the universe, not the details of how women and men live their lives. And *Wuthering Heights* is exceptional amongst the novels of the period for the absence of any explicit condemnation of Heathcliff's conduct, or any suggestion that evil might bring its own punishment.

This collection is published to celebrate the bicentenary of Emily Brontë's birth in 1818. What each story has in common is that, despite their shared moment of inspiration, they are themselves, and their quality stands testament both to our contemporary writers' skills, and the timelessness of *Wuthering Heights*. For, though mores and expectations and opportunities alter, wherever we live and whoever we are, the human heart does not change very much. We understand love and hate, jealousy and peace, grief and injustice, because we experience these things too – as writers, as readers, as our individual selves.

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AMULET AND FEATHERS

LEILA ABOULELA

TODAY I SET OUT to avenge my father's death. I took his dagger, the one with the two points, and I filled a pouch with poison leaves. I put on my brother's clothes and his turban so I would not be recognised. I hid the shells, feathers, and cowries deep in my pocket – I would only need them when I arrived in Gobir. I looped my amulet on a cord and tied it around my neck. I did not feel afraid.

My mother was alone in her room. She would mourn my father for months, not scenting her body or wearing gold. From outside, I heard her praying. She wanted to dream of him, to see how he was in his new life. But he had not yet visited any of us in a dream. I did not go into her room to say goodbye. She would stop me. She would say a young girl had no business travelling beyond the outskirts of town.

In our courtyard, I looked at everything – at one of our goats heavy with kid, our water pots with their reddish-brown colour, and the coop where the pigeons fluttered and cooed. I looked at the ashy remains of yesterday's cooking fire. I picked up my little cat. She knew who I was, she was not fooled. I kissed her and said, 'I will not play with you today or give you milk. Even tomorrow I will still be away.'

In the marketplace, I pulled down the sash that was wrapped around my turban and covered my mouth. I walked fast so that no one would recognise me. I bumped into my friend Aysha, her hair in corn rows. I almost cried out, 'Aysha, you have plaited your hair at last!' But she brushed past me and did not notice who I was.

Bello was buying guava from a seller, but he happened to glance my way. Unlike Aysha, he stopped and looked again. He started to follow me, and I pretended not to hear him. ‘Maryam,’ he said, ‘it’s you, isn’t it, Maryam?’ He looked like the village idiot, gaping and shadowing me.

At last I said, ‘Bello, go away and don’t tell my family that you have seen me.’

He started to ask one question after the other. ‘Where are you going? Why are you dressed like that?’

Bello and I had left the marketplace by now and were at the outskirts of the town. There was hardly anyone around. I stopped under a tree and we sat down. I moved the wrapper from my mouth and said, ‘I am going to Gobir to avenge my father’s death.’

‘But he has already been avenged. The man who killed him was stabbed immediately by your father’s men.’

‘I know all this,’ I said, and started to remember when my heart hurt so much that I couldn’t breathe, that bad bad day when my father’s body was carried back from the mosque, his robes wet with blood.

I said to Bello, ‘Do you know the name of the man who killed my father?’

‘Yes, Ibra. He killed your father because in a land dispute your father ruled against him.’

‘No,’ I said, ‘Ibra was sent by someone else.’

‘Maryam, you can’t know this. You have never set eyes on Ibra or spoken to him.’

‘I saw him after he was killed. I went specially to see him.’

‘Why?’ Bello’s eyes were wide.

I did not answer his question because he would not understand. Only my father would have understood because he was the Shehu, and a Shehu could see inside people, he was blessed. People came from far away to consult him because he could answer any question put to him. Sometimes my father made decisions that others didn’t understand, but, because they had faith in him, they accepted his judgement. When he betrothed me to Bello, my mother wasn’t happy – she complained to her friends, ‘He teaches his daughter how to read and write. He takes her with him to the mosque. He says she is the best girl among the Fulani, and then he gives her to Bello!’ There was nothing special about Bello. His family were neither skilled, nor

high in position. I too was surprised at my father's choice because I had thought my future bridegroom would be a grown man and that I would be in awe of him. Instead Bello was a boy my age.

Now I brushed away his question. 'It does not matter why I wanted to see Ibra's face. What matters is that he told me he was sent by someone else.'

'Oh,' said Bello. 'He woke up from the dead and spoke to you! Maryam, you are not making sense. No one gave Ibra a chance to speak.'

'Don't mock me. Ibra came to me in a dream. He said Hind from the tribe of Gobir sent him to kill the Shehu.'

'Why would she do that?'

'I don't know, but tomorrow I will reach her and find out. And tomorrow I will avenge my father's death.'

It was not easy to get rid of Bello. He wanted to come with me, but at the end I threatened him that I would break off our engagement. He didn't argue with me. He knew it was my right. This was the dowry my father had decided upon – that Bello would give me freedom to do whatever I wanted. 'He is giving you away for nothing,' my mother grumbled. But my father was patient and explained. He said, 'Ambitious, proud men mould women and shape them as they wish. But no man could mould my daughter, he would break her if he tried. She needs someone modest and solid, someone who would encircle her but not come too close.' I understood my father's words, but my mother didn't.

At night I camped near a stream. The moon was yellow and bright. The wind was gentle, and nothing was still, not the grass, not the djinns, nor the tigers and hyenas who breathed and listened. I was not afraid because my amulet with the sacred verses protected me. But I could smell the animals' hunger. The djinns twisted and bounced around me, their breath warm against my face. Because they were so many I felt lonely and small. I missed my father. He was my mentor, and I shall never have that again. An ant bit my foot, and I guessed it was a viper that the amulet had reduced into an ant. 'We can never be fully protected,' my father used to say, 'we belong to this earth and we live by its rules. But prayers and amulets can make a calamity small and soften the blows that fall on us.' So instead of a deadly viper's bite, I had an ant's bite to scratch. Instead of hyenas and vultures, I only heard frogs and bats. All because of my amulet.

When I entered Gobir, I was no longer dressed like a boy. My braids were long on my shoulder, and I displayed my shells, cowries, and feathers. I walked about the marketplace, calling out that I had fortunes for sale. People looked at me because I was a stranger, and they smiled their welcome. I found a tent where two hairstylists were plaiting women's hair. While their hair was being pulled and twisted, I tossed shells and read their fortunes in the sand. Soon a lot of women gathered around, pleased with what I was saying. I pretended to study the position of the shells when they fell, how they clustered or separated and which side they lay on – but I was really using my thinking. I could guess at a woman's personality by looking into her eyes. I could feel her anxieties and wishes by the way she sat and the payment she promised. I tossed my shells on the ground, and all the time my ears were ready to hear the name Hind. I was in Gobir, so she could not be far now. I had already spat on the poison herbs, kneaded a paste and smeared it onto the blade of my father's dagger.

Noon came and went, but no one mentioned Hind. I could not accept the Gobirs' hospitality. I could not swallow their food, and their water tasted sour. My mind hurt from making up lies and from the effort of guessing. I sat cross-legged on the ground, encircled by three young girls my age. They giggled as I told their fortune one after the other. They were only interested in who they were going to marry. I touched the shells on the ground and said, 'You will marry one of three brothers – see how these shells are close together – one, two, three.' I made up stories about their future. The silent, beautiful one would travel with her husband across the sea. The strong, fat one would prosper in the marketplace. The one who had a rough voice and was as restless as a boy would one day give birth to many sons. Now she said, grinning, 'There's Hind! Hind, come and have your fortune told.'

I looked up and saw the white light of the sun and the flutter of a large fan made of ostrich feathers. Hind was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. Out loud I praised the Almighty for creating her and she smiled her thanks, her voice low and pleasant. She looked like she was older than me, her skin was clear, her hair plaited with gold beads. It was when her friends made room for her and she moved to sit down, that I noticed her slanting wary eyes, her nervous manner. Her movements were not smooth. Her head dipped forward as though she was an awkward bird, as if she were ill. I had expected her to be strong and smooth, and that was how she first looked,

but now I saw that deep inside her was a kind of weakness that couldn't tell right from wrong. She sat hiding her mouth behind her fan, it made her eyes look bigger. Her turn now to have her fortune told. I shook the shells in my hands and tossed them onto the ground. They didn't cluster together, they broke apart.

'You have blood on your hands,' I said and my voice didn't break. 'You sent a man named Ibra, south to Soketo, to kill the Shehu.'

There was a hush in the gathering. None of the girls contradicted me. They were in awe of what they imagined to be my magical powers. Hind didn't stop fanning herself. I looked at the sway of the black-and-white ostrich feathers, smooth and pretty. In her eyes there was nothing, no guilt or sadness, just nothing.

My head throbbed and I felt sweaty. I blinked, but everything seemed blurred. I caught a vision of that day, when I lost the one I loved most. I saw how it had all happened. There was my father in the mosque just as he was about to lead the prayer. He turned first like he always did, tall and smiling, saying, 'Straighten your lines and stand close. Don't leave gaps for Satan to come between you.' Then Ibra, who was standing in the very front row, stepped forward and stabbed him in the neck.

I heard my voice, careful and soft, 'Tell me, Hind, why you wanted to kill the Shehu.'

She stopped fanning herself and instead held the fan in her lap, stroking each feather. Her voice was almost flirty, and her eyes shone with mischief and pleasure. 'Ibra was courting me. He asked me to set a sum for my bride-price. He was ready to give me everything.' She laughed, and her friends looked at her with admiration. I could imagine Ibra under her spell, wanting her at any cost. She went on, 'But I already had wealth, I told him, give me something more precious than wealth, give me life, not any life, but a mighty life, a life of a chief or a saint or a warrior. Ibra was meant to escape, I didn't want him captured or hurt, but he was stupid. He asked me, "Who should I kill?" I could think of five big men, but I couldn't choose which one. So I gave each a colour …' She giggled and shrugged. She was like a little girl describing a game.

'I dyed three of my feathers. I dyed one green and one red and one blue. I left one naturally black and one white. So I had five altogether, five men, five feathers. I put them all in a sack and closed my eyes. I put my hand in

the sack and took out one feather. It was the green one – green for the Shehu.'

I stood up and said, 'I am Maryam and I am here to avenge my father's death.' Her mouth fell open but she didn't scream like the others. I reached into my pocket. Hind raised her fan and arms as if to protect herself. The dagger was too light, something was wrong. I raised it, and because it was too light my hand jerked forward. Hind lowered her arms and sighed. I looked at my hand, but instead of a dagger, I was holding a feather. It was as if sunset had come because I couldn't see very well and the cry that came from me didn't sound like my voice. I dropped the feather and ran.

I ran from Gobir, leaving my bag, my shells, even my brother's turban. I cried and kept running. Around me the light was purple and sleepy. I kept running until I reached a forest. I leaned against a tree and vomited, which made my head throb more. Why did my dagger turn into a feather? How could it, when Hind was the one to blame? I heard someone calling my name. It sounded like Bello, but I wasn't sure. I started running again and now it was completely dark. Now the bats came out and the owls. My feet caught on something and I tripped. I fell face forward. There was a pain in my foot, but it was good to lie on the ground. I was ashamed that I had got so close to Hind, heard her confess, and then, just like a weak girl, done nothing. I pressed my face into the dark sand.

I saw my father in his room at home, and knew I was dreaming. But still I felt relieved that he was standing up, tall, smiling, looking only at me. This was what my mother had prayed for – that my father would visit one of us in a dream. And he had chosen me. I wanted to tell him how sad I'd been, but I was so happy to see him. Here he was young in his new world. He was comfortable and laughing. I could hug him and we could sit on the rug in his room and, like in old times, I would ask him one question after another. 'Why did the dagger turn into a feather?'

'Because of your amulet,' he said.

'My amulet protected Hind?'

'No,' he laughed, 'it protected you from the consequences of hurting her. Besides it was my dagger, and a Shehu's dagger mustn't be used for revenge.'

I sat very quiet, knowing this was a dream and I shouldn't wake up. I must make it last as long as I could. He said, 'Why did you go to look at

Ibra after he died?'

'Because I wanted to see the face of someone who was going to Hell. But he looked ordinary, just like anyone else.'

'And when you went looking for Hind,' he asked, 'what did you want to see?'

'Evil,' I said, 'I wanted to see the face of evil, and I saw a beautiful girl.'

He paused and then said, 'You will always want to know and learn. This is a good thing. But it is an eye for an eye and a life for a life and my death has already been matched by another's.'

'This is what Bello said. But it is not fair. Hind – how could she! She must be punished.'

'She would have been, if my friends had questioned Ibra instead of silencing him for ever.'

'They were angry,' I said, defending them. No one had ever criticised them, and now he, of all people, was!

'Well,' he went on, 'is anger a good thing?'

'No, because it does not let us see clearly.'

He smiled, and his voice became gentle again. 'I don't want you to be angry Maryam. When we are born, our day of death is already decided and nothing can change it. Every day we live, we are walking towards it. Listen good!'

My foot hurt, but I made myself listen good. He went on, 'If it wasn't Hind and Ibra, it would have been someone or something else. I am well and happy and I want you to be happy for me.'

I woke up in my room. My mother was looking over me. She smiled and kissed me. My foot was wrapped in a bandage. It hurt when I tried to move it. 'You broke your toe,' my mother said, 'don't worry, it will heal. Bello found you near the stream and carried you all the way here. He had been following you all along to keep an eye on you.'

She would start to like him after this. She would agree that he was the best husband for me, the only one who would embrace me without crushing me, who would encircle me without stopping me. Now she wanted me to drink warm milk with honey. Now she wanted me to speak. I told her how I went to Gobir and how I saw Hind. I told her how I did not, after all,

avenge my father’s death, and how I dreamed of him. How well he looked in my dream, and all the things that he said.

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NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Leila Aboulela was the first winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing. She is the author of four novels, *The Kindness of Enemies*, *The Translator*, a *New York Times* 100 Notable Books of the Year, *Minaret*, and *Lyrics Alley*, Fiction Winner of the Scottish Book Awards. Her work has been translated into fifteen languages, and she was long-listed three times for the Orange Prize. A collection of her short stories, *Elsewhere, Home*, is forthcoming in summer 2018. Leila grew up in Sudan and moved, in her mid-twenties, to Scotland. www.leila-aboulela.com

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A NOTE ON EMILY BRONTË

EMILY JANE BRONTË, AUTHOR of *Wuthering Heights*, was born on 30 July 1818, the fifth of six children of the reverend Patrick Brontë and his wife Maria. She was born at Thornton, near Bradford, in West Yorkshire. In 1820 Patrick Brontë was appointed perpetual curate of Haworth church, five miles away. The bleak parsonage at Haworth, and the windswept moorland surrounding it, became central to Emily's creative life, and had a profound influence on her writing.

Emily and her sisters were taught the essential female skills of needlework and household management by their Aunt Branwell, who made her home with the family following the death of Mrs Brontë in 1821, when Emily was just three years of age. The children studied the Bible, as well as history and geography, with their father. In 1824 Emily joined her elder sisters at the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge, near Kirkby Lonsdale. Conditions at the school were harsh, and later provided Charlotte with a model for the infamous Lowood School in her novel *Jane Eyre*. This first experience of leaving home ended tragically with the deaths of the two eldest girls, Maria and Elizabeth, who died within a few weeks of each other in 1825, aged just eleven and ten years. Charlotte and Emily were withdrawn from the school and spent the next few years at home, together with their youngest sister Anne, and brother Branwell, resuming lessons with their father and aunt. Patrick Brontë instilled a love of learning in all his children, and they read anything they could lay hands on, delighting in the novels of Sir Walter Scott and the poetry of Lord Byron.

Outside lesson time the children created a rich imaginary world sparked by their father's gift to Branwell of a set of toy soldiers. Each of the soldiers was given a name and a character by the children, and an increasingly complex sequence of stories and plays developed around them. Whilst Charlotte and Branwell joined forces to create the kingdom of Angria, Emily and Anne went on to form Gondal, an imaginary island in the North Pacific, with a cold climate and bleak moorland landscape reminiscent of Haworth. The central characters were as wild as any of the inhabitants of

Wuthering Heights, and the Gondal saga continued to absorb Emily into adulthood.

In 1835 Emily was sent away for a second stint at boarding school, this time to Roe Head, near Mirfield, a much more genteel affair than Cowan Bridge, where her sister Charlotte was employed as a teacher. At seventeen, Emily was older than the other pupils; she did not make friends and failed to adapt to school life. Her health declined, and within three months Emily was back at Haworth. She had established her right to remain at home, and, with only two exceptions, never left it again.

In 1838, despite her lack of formal education, she obtained a teaching post at Miss Patchett's school at Law Hill, near Halifax. Emily survived the uncongenial employment for just six months before heading back to Haworth. Shortly after, the sisters' decision to set up a school of their own at the parsonage provided Charlotte with the impetus to improve her language skills by spending time studying at a school on the continent. It seems surprising that she suggested Emily should accompany her, and more surprising still that Emily agreed to go.

The sisters' stay at the Pensionnat Heger in Brussels, funded by their Aunt Branwell, was cut short after nine months by news of their aunt's illness and death. While Charlotte returned to Brussels for another year, Emily remained at the parsonage as housekeeper. She threw herself into the old routine of household tasks combined with writing, and wasn't overly disappointed when the school project came to nothing.

One day in 1845 Charlotte discovered a collection of Emily's poems and was awestruck by their quality. She hatched a plan to publish a selection of poems by all three sisters, and, although Emily was initially furious at the invasion of her privacy, she was eventually persuaded that the poems should be published. Branwell was not included in the project, despite the fact that several of his poems had already been published in local newspapers. After a series of disappointments and ill-fated career attempts, his early promise had been blighted by alcoholism. It's unclear whether he even knew about his sisters' publications, which all appeared under the androgynous-sounding pseudonyms, Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. The book of poems was published in 1846, but despite some favourable reviews, the small volume sold only two copies. 'Ill success failed to crush us,' Charlotte later wrote, adding that 'the mere effort to succeed had given a

wonderful zest to existence: it must be pursued.’ The sisters set to work again, and three prose tales by the Bells were soon winging their way to the first on a long list of publishing houses.

Emily’s *Wuthering Heights* was published in December 1847. Branwell died the following year, and it is said that his funeral was the last occasion on which Emily left the parsonage. She died on 19 December 1848, at the age of thirty, from tuberculosis. It soon became clear that Anne was also ill; she died from tuberculosis in the following year, aged twenty-nine years. Charlotte lived on at the parsonage with her elderly father, and published a total of three novels in her lifetime (a fourth was published posthumously). In 1854 she married her father’s curate, Arthur Bell Nicholls, but died nine months later in the early stages of pregnancy. For the remainder of the nineteenth century, Charlotte was regarded as the famous Brontë. Although the originality of *Wuthering Heights* was acknowledged, the novel repelled many of its early readers, and Emily Brontë never lived to see the huge impact her writing would have.

Ann Dinsdale
Principal Curator, Brontë Parsonage Museum

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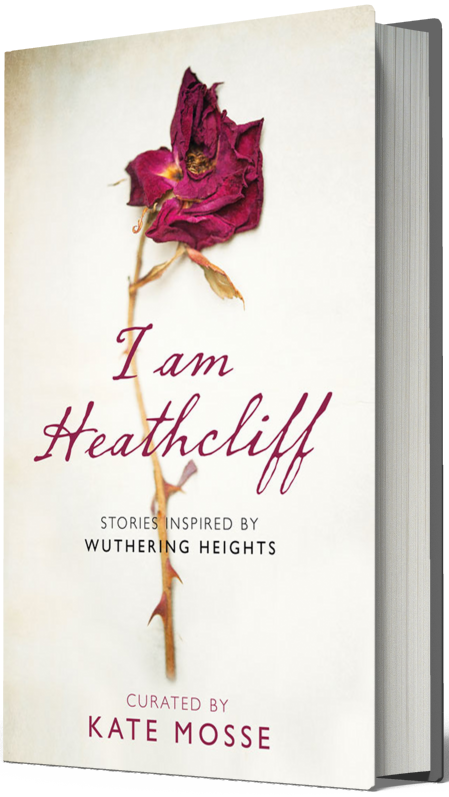

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